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Ideological Manipulation of Controversial Information: The Unusual Case of the Chinese-Subtitled Version of House of Cards

by Dingkun Wang and Xiaochun Zhang

Despite its rapid proliferation since the 1990s, research in the field of audiovisual translation (AVT) is a relatively new branch of Translation Studies. This becomes evident when we consider the current status of AVT-related research, which is yet to address the political and ideological aspects of translation (Díaz Cintas 2012: 280-281). Existing studies in translation have primarily dealt with literary texts, leaving the power hierarchies and hidden ideological agendas in AVT largely unexplored (ibid.). In the context of ideology and translation, Schäffner (2014: 23) comments that:

The relationship between ideology and translation is multifarious. Any translation may be reproduced as ideological since the choice of a source text and the use of which the subsequent target text is put is determined by the interests, aims, and



objectives of social agents. But ideological aspects can also be determined within a text itself, both at the lexical and grammatical level.

When it comes to the context of China, research has focused on the official acceptance of and resistance to foreign cultural and media products by discussing the stringent gatekeeping and manipulation functions performed by censorship institutions (Qian 2004; Zhang 2004; Fong 2007; Hu 2013) as well as by analysing the strategy and outcomes of manipulation in state-sponsored translation (Chang 1998; Li, J. 2012; Li, P. 2012).

Manipulation in AVT can be caused by constraints emanating from the audiovisual medium, as the migration of the original information from oral language to written texts always requires some adaptation. However, as manipulation may be associated with censoring controversial or sensitive content, it can also be politically oriented. This is certainly the case in AVT in China, where translation is largely carried out in service of politics—and thus ideology (Chang 1998: 252). Hatim (2000: 218) highlights the relationship between ideology and language, defining the former as “a body of ideas which reflects the beliefs and interests of an individual, a group of individuals, a societal institution, etc., and which ultimately finds expression in language”. In contrast, Van Dijk (1998: 120) places greater emphasis on the cognitive and social aspects of ideology by viewing it as a “social representation” shared by the members of a group. Meanwhile, Lefevere (1992) discusses two determining factors in literary translation which also apply to the current situation in AVT: the first is the translator’s ideology, which is either maintained by the translator on the basis of his/her own judgement or enforced through constraints imposed by some form of patronage; the second is the poetics of translation in a given society, which correspond to the prevailing aesthetic standard. Hence, most decisions in the process of translation are ideologically determined (Álvarez and Vidal 1996: 2). Translators do not merely transfer words and meaning from one language to another, but rather act intentionally through their choices of words and structures, thus revealing their own socio-political surroundings. The original information may be manipulated by adding extra information or by omitting, distorting or modifying content to avoid cultural and ideological misunderstandings (Khawira 2010). Extant research focusing on the Chinese context also reflects these arguments, stressing that censorship invests institutions with the authority to prevent translations from being published or to allow them to be published only in a specific form (Chang 1998; Qian 2004; Zhang 2004; Hu 2013).

In China, the authorised translations and broadcasts of foreign films and TV programmes are determined by the interests, aims and objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which exercises ideological control over cultural and media production through an intricate system of censorship before, during and after each



production. Elements that question or attack communism, China and/or its culture may be regarded as sensitive topics in the Chinese context (Chang 1998: 263) and must be toned down or eliminated in translation. Franco Aixelá (1996: 64) calls this strategy “attenuation”, whereby the translator replaces ideologically unacceptable content with ideas that will not pose “a problem of ideological or cultural opacity, or acceptability, for the average readers or for any agent with power in the target culture” (ibid.: 58). However, this argument may be considered too simplistic in light of the complex and evolving socio-political circumstances under which AVT is subjected to ideological manipulation in China. Despite the fact that sensitive content, such as sex, anti-communism and/or Sino-phobic sentiments, is considered inappropriate and dangerous and should thus be forbidden, novels (such as George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* [1949; 2004] and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* [1955; 2010]), films and TV series (such as *V for Vendetta* [2005] and *House of Cards* [2013–present]) are still officially released in China. The authorised acceptance of these controversial works calls for a re-examination of the nature of ideological manipulation in Chinese translation, since the general principle or practice of censorship and ideological manipulation may have changed in response to the latest developments in the audiovisual media landscape. We seek to explore ideological manipulation in terms of its broader socio-political impact by examining the Chinese subtitles used in the TV drama *House of Cards* (Season 2, 2014). The series is shown on the Sohu video-streaming service in China. Instead of seeing sensitive content being deleted or rewritten (as conventional practice would require), we observe that some politically sensitive messages are exposed in the Chinese-subtitled version.

In this paper, we will first provide an overview of access in China to foreign TV series in which the content does not always comply with the standards enforced by censorship institutions in China; this serves to explain, from our point of view, the reasons why a political drama like *House of Cards* can even be released in China. We will then investigate the sensitive content in the series and how it is translated in order to show how accurately the source language (SL) information is conveyed in the corresponding Chinese translation. The translated version may easily lead the audience to draw controversial parallels to the real world, including corrupt figures in the Communist regime in China. Finally, we argue that this way of translating still serves the objectives of the current administration by reinforcing its anti-corruption message and the legitimacy of the regime, thus fulfilling the function of official propaganda.



1. ACCESS TO FOREIGN TV IN CHINA

When China opened its doors to the rest of the world and to the West in particular, unofficial traffic in entertainment media began to gain in prominence among Chinese audiences (Wilson 2011: 76). Indeed, China has demonstrated its capacity to meet the needs of young, educated urbanites thanks to the advancement of media technologies and the expansion of domestic broadcasting networks that reach Chinese audiences across the globe (Latham 2007: 242). This section will describe how foreign TV became accessible to the Chinese audience through the Internet despite occasional crackdowns by the authorities.

1.1. Access Restricted by Censorship

Since China began its globalisation campaign in the 1990s, an increasing number of foreign media and entertainment products have become accessible to Chinese citizens through authorised channels, although such access is subject to strict official control. However, the spread of knowledge and materials from foreign cultures, particularly from the West, has boosted audience demand for an authentic experience of foreign popular cultural products (such as TV programmes) through the less controlled media on the Internet rather than the dominant national television networks (Gao, Y. 2012: 65). Via the few officially released programmes, audiences have been deprived of the original flavour of the SL dialogue and popular cultural references due to censorship of officially approved subtitling and dubbing (Hsiao 2014: 219). Meanwhile, domestically produced TV dramas have remained predictable in their plots, limited in themes and explicit in political posturing since the 1980s, when the domestic production of TV programmes began to thrive (Gao, Y. 2012: 62-65). For viewers, particularly young, better-educated urbanites, foreign TV series and films are more open-minded and socially tolerant, offering a sense of the unpredictable (Wilson 2011: 141).

Despite high demand from the audience, the Chinese government has maintained its firm stance in restricting access to foreign TV. Nationally, state-controlled cultural regulators have exerted considerable influence over Chinese domestic television media by confining the range of permitted formats and content (Gao, Y. 2012: 68). Internationally, foreign media networks and film production companies have to undergo complex, protracted bureaucratic and censorship-related procedures in order to enter the market in Mainland China (Rohn 2010: 260-261). The processes of state-sanctioned marketisation and opening-up have been subject to



intense censorship in order to avoid any potential repercussions from the influence of foreign cultures and ideologies (mostly Western), which may inspire the viewers to challenge the CCP's rule (Shirk 2010: 3). By masking erotic, vulgar or 'inconvenient' content in foreign TV programmes, or even banning some of them outright, the state has enforced censorship not only to repress but also to influence and guide authors, artwork and public opinion, thereby defending the CCP's ideological governance (Xie 2012: 10).

The efficacy of censorship is at odds with recent innovations in communication and digital technology, which in many cases facilitate piracy and provide the Chinese audience with access to foreign films and TV shows in their original versions. Piracy has been a "thriving and stubbornly persistent" reality in China for more than three decades (Gao, D. 2014: 125), and it has become a part of Chinese people's daily lives. Since the turn of the century, piracy has found an alternative and more secure route to continue functioning: the Internet, which enables distributors to provide consumers with audiovisual products in a streamlined fashion. The availability of point-to-point connections between the consumer's personal device and the online audiovisual resources facilitates piracy even further. In this process, a widespread fansubbing network has emerged and proliferated throughout China.

1.2. From Fansubbing to Licensed Online Broadcasts

Fansubbing groups have sought to provide the Chinese audience with an authentic experience of world cinema and other media/entertainment products by preserving the integrity of the original films and striving for transparency in translation (Wilson 2011; Gao, Y. 2012; Hsiao 2014). It is generally agreed that anyone residing in China, who has consumed abundant foreign audiovisual content, must have benefited from the resources provided by the fansubbing community (Zhang and Mao 2013). However, fansubbing activities inevitably violate copyright law in China and therefore have become the primary target of the anti-piracy campaign backed by the Chinese government, which has been making significant efforts to improve copyright protection. The campaign to improve copyright legitimacy is designed to help the government win global recognition (Pang 2012). Since 2008, the government has moved to shut down websites operated by fansubbing groups and other unlicensed online video-streaming providers for their sharing of "lewd, obscene, and violent content" (Xie and Huang 2010: 429) and their infringement of copyright laws (Hu 2013). Meanwhile, the authorities have enhanced their official supervision of the audiovisual content distributed online by announcing that online video-streaming



services must be provided by licensed enterprises which are either state-owned or state-controlled (Sennitt 2008, in Hu 2013: 441). However, this emphasis on copyright is primarily concerned with securing broadcasting rights in order for the government to make profit and thereby compete with private services rather than protecting the rights of original authors (Hu 2013). Facing pressure from the government, fansubbing groups have resorted to cooperating with private video websites which, in turn, are eager to engage in new forms of partnerships, as both sides recognise the importance of copyright legitimacy in the realm of market competition with state-owned enterprises (ibid.). The government appears to be tolerant of the cooperation between the fansubbing community and private enterprises as long as they focus solely on material consumption and popular culture because, according to Fung (2009: 297), the obsession and preoccupation with popular culture are likely to distract people “from critical discourse of civic engagement that could undermine state legitimacy”. As Yuezhi Zhao (2008: 223) points out, the authorities have allowed “market-driven popular culture and soft entertainment” to emerge, but they only use these forms of entertainment to maintain “social pacification” and to “sustain the party’s continuing political dominance”.

It is against this background that a number of popular American TV series have reached Chinese audiences through video-streaming services such as the one provided by Sohu, the largest Chinese Internet enterprise (ranked 37th in Alexa’s global rankings as of 7 September 2015).¹ Among these series, the second season of *House of Cards* (2014) was shown to the Chinese audience in its original edition with a full translation of the SL dialogue, despite ideologically ‘unacceptable’ content such as sex, crime and critical views on communism and China. Lefevere (1992: 2) had observed that:

Translation is not just a “window opened on another world,” or some such pious platitude. Rather, translation is a channel opened, often not without a certain reluctance, through which foreign influences can penetrate the native culture, challenge it, and even contribute to subverting it.

The CCP has a long-standing media policy which aims to educate the general public by entertaining them (Zhao 1998: 43), and it is apparent that the Chinese authorities are fully aware of the power of translation. However, censorship institutions may have deliberately allowed the series to be shown and translated in this way in order to

¹ Alexa’s current Internet rankings can be found at <http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/sohu.com> (7 September 2015).



reinforce ideological manipulation through a broader socio-political impact that serves the government's political objectives.

2. THE TRANSLATION OF SENSITIVE REFERENCES IN *HOUSE OF CARDS*

The Netflix production *House of Cards* (2013–present) tells the story of Francis Underwood, a Democratic Party whip who plots his political rise to the presidency. Before the second season of the series was officially imported by Sohu, it was already one of the most popular USA TV series among Chinese audiences, possibly because the Chinese viewers may well have become tired of watching domestic TV dramas propagating the Party's history and the past glories of ancient China.

The second season of the series was received by a large audience in China as it attracted not only American TV series enthusiasts (mostly young and highly educated), but also viewers from older age groups. This may be due to the fact that the storyline frequently refers to China, though the references to China and the depiction of the main Chinese character, Xander Feng, are controversial and in many cases negative in terms of the image attributed to the Chinese government. In processing this controversial information, the audience may easily refer to current political affairs, in particular corruption and diplomatic issues involving the USA, China and its neighbouring countries. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Sohu CEO, Chaoyang Zhang, emphasised that censors did not raise any objections to the sensitive content portrayed in the series (Wang 2014), even though such information is often deleted from original programmes or banned from public broadcasts in China (Latham 2007; Shirk 2010). In this section, we will analyse some of the examples that refer to contemporary diplomatic disputes between China and other Asian countries and that reflect the perspective of the USA government. In many cases, the dialogue may contradict the opinion of some Chinese people, which is broadly in line with that of the Chinese government when it comes to international relations. We will also address the references to Chinese internal affairs, such as the power struggle among Party members and the re-emergence of bureaucratic capitalism intertwined with corruption, topics against which the current leadership has maintained a firm stance. We seek to investigate how controversial statements are subtitled in these examples and to demonstrate how an 'honest' translation may also serve manipulative ends in a broader socio-political context that goes beyond the content of the original.



2.1. Sensitive Topics and Controversial References

Controversial messages are often conveyed through references to contemporary diplomatic issues such as the territorial disputes between China and its neighbouring countries. The content of the scene depicted in Table 1 is preserved in the Chinese-subtitled version and thereby informs the Chinese audience about the disagreement between the USA government and China in what regards the sovereignty of several islands in the South China Sea. The subtitles project a positive image of the Chinese government in defending the integrity of the nation against hostile neighbours and in reinforcing the image of the USA as their ally. Although the general public is often critical of the Chinese government in domestic socio-political matters, most people support the government with regard to international challenges, especially the country's territorial disputes with Japan.

SL	TL	BACKTRANSLATION
President Walker: Mr Prime Minister, my concern is escalation.	首相先生我的忧虑越来越深了	Mr Prime Minister, my concern grows deeper and deeper
Japanese Prime Minister (JPM): Well, I'm asking for a small portion of the 7 th Fleet.	我只需要第七舰队的一小部分	I only need a small portion of the 7 th Fleet
We must bring China into line.	我们必须让中国认清局面	We must make China recognise the situation
Show them that the US and Japan maintain a strong alliance.	向中国展示日美联盟坚不可破	Show China that the alliance between Japan and America is unbreakable
President Walker: Have you reached out directly to Beijing?	你直接和北京方面联系过吗	Have you contacted the Beijing side directly?
JPM: No recognition that the island belongs to Japan.	他们拒不承认该岛属于日本	They refuse to acknowledge that this island belongs to Japan
President Walker: Well, I'd like to speak to my team	我得和我的团队讨论一下	I need to discuss with my team and draft a plan



and formulate a plan.	拟订一个计划	
The Admiral: Two Chinese destroyers entered waters	大概六小时前 两艘中国驱逐舰进入了	About six hours ago, two Chinese destroyers entered
within three miles of Yonaguni Island here	与那国岛附近方圆三英里的水域	Yongaguni Island within three miles of the water zone
approximately six hours ago.	也就是这里	It is here
See how close the island is to Taiwan.	可以看到该岛离台湾很近	(You) can see that this island is very close to Taiwan
President Walker: This is different than the standoff over the Senkaku Islands.	这与钓鱼岛的僵局性质不同	This is different from the stale situation of Fishing Islands by nature

Table 1. (House of Cards: Season 2, Episode 10)

Apart from the change in word order, which is inevitable in Chinese subtitling (Zhao 2004), the manipulation of the SL content is obvious in the solution for 'Senkaku Islands', which is translated as 钓鱼岛 [Fishing Islands]. This is the Chinese name for the same geographical location designated by the SL term, which itself is derived from the Japanese. Nevertheless, the controversy represented by the original is emphasised to the Chinese audience rather than hidden from them, as the term 钓鱼岛 immediately points to the contemporary disputes between China and Japan and thereby encourages the audience to remain positively disposed towards the military deployment addressed in the original. Similarly, the two examples below point to manipulation at the word level only, despite the sensitive content relating to corruption, misconduct and power struggles in the CCP.

SL	TL	BACKTRANSLATION
Feng: I have allies who want the bridge.	我有盟友想修建这座桥	I have allies wanting to build this bridge
Without it, they become my	没了桥 他们就会变成敌人	Without the bridge, they



enemies.		will become enemies
I've been put on trial twice.	我已经两次受审	I have been charged twice
Stemper: Corruption charges.	腐败指控	Corruption charges
Feng: Everyone in China who works on this level pays who they need to pay.	在中国 我这个层次的人都会贿赂该贿赂的人	In China, people on my level bribe those who should be bribed
And they kill who they need to kill	杀掉该杀的人	Kill those who should be killed
People disappear all the time, Mr Stamper.	总有人莫名消失 斯坦普先生	There are always people disappearing, Mr Stumper
I could disappear. You could disappear.	我也可能消失 你也可能消失	I can also disappear. You too may disappear

Table 2. (House of Cards: Season 2, Episode 7)

SL	TL	BACK TRANSLATION
Tusk: Politics and business are intertwined in China	在中国 政治和生意是纠缠不清的	In China, politics and business are intertwined and indistinguishable
as I'm sure you know.	想必你知道这一点	You surely know this point
It's not uncommon to partner	为了确保中央政府的许可	In order to secure the permission from the Central Government
with someone who can ensure Beijing's approval.	交有门路的合作伙伴很正常	It is very normal to have well-connected partners

Table 3. (House of Cards: Season 2, Episode 9)

Table 2 shows part of the conversation between Douglas Stemper and Xander Feng, who are negotiating Feng's involvement in the construction of Port Jefferson Bridge in the USA. The line 'Everyone in China who works on this level' is translated as 在中国我



这个层次的人 [In China, people on my level]. 我 [I] emphasises that Feng is a typical example of people in comparable political positions in the CCP, while the SL content contains no such particularisation. This linguistic manipulation helps reinforce the depiction of Feng as a corrupt high-level official, who is capable of using dishonest and even brutal methods to earn support or suppress his opponents.

Table 3 reports the lines spoken by Raymond Tusk, a billionaire who justifies his partnership with Xander Feng to a journalist as a common way to do business successfully in China. The term ‘Beijing’ is rendered as 中央政府 [the Central Government] which is more explanatory than 北京 [Beijing]. The translation of this line hints at the notion of 关系 [*guan xi*, connections], which is associated with “an informal institutional mechanism facilitating the contracting process of corrupt exchange” (Li, L. 2011: 1) between a briber and the bribed in Chinese society. Again, this linguistic manipulation helps clarify the controversial statements made in the original rather than replacing them entirely.

By contrast, Example 4 below represents a negative assertion about some of the most influential figures of the CCP, including Mao Zedong and his regime. Although its preservation is at odds with the Party line, the subtitler seems to have decided to take the risk nevertheless. However, the taboo subject alluded to in the original (i.e. the death of Mao and his political vision of China as an absolute Communist state) is exposed with some caution. Thus, while preserving the controversial statement, the subtitler has also added the honorific 主席 [chairman] after the surname 毛 [Mao], making Underwood’s assertion less offensive.

SL	TL	BACK TRANSLATION
Underwood: Mao is dead. And so is his China.	毛主席已经死了 他的中国也死了	Chairman Mao is dead His China is also dead

Table 4. (House of Cards: Season 2, Episode 5)

Sohu CEO, Chaoyang Zhang, explained that the series is a favourite of many authorities (Wang 2014). Although Zhang did not mention the names of any particular officials, Qishan Wang, the Secretary of the Central Commission of Discipline Inspection and a member of China’s highest decision-making body, has referred to the series in many of his talks on anti-corruption and expressed his interest in viewing it



during meetings with visiting foreign leaders (Qin and Wang 2014; Li, A. 2014). Hence, this endorsement by Wang, who in turn advocates the interests of the current administration, may be among the reasons why the sensitive content managed to escape censorship.

2.2. Questioning Censorship

In addition to channelling the audience into legitimate online viewing venues, so as to suppress online piracy, facilitating licensed online broadcasts of foreign TV series in China may also help portray the current Central Government as an innovative administration. However, this attempt may be considered hypocritical by the audience, as the same administration that kept the censorship authorities from intervening in the translation and broadcasting of the second season of *House of Cards* forced the censor to filter out controversial content in the first season. This is evident in the deletion of a scene in the first episode of season one, where the character Peter Russo says to a police officer: "China doesn't have a king. It's a communist oligarchy". China's censorship is further called into question because it postponed the release of the third season in China due to a change of policy (Weibo 2015).

The government has taken the rights to manage and oversee uploaded media content away from China's private video websites. Previously, however, the government's policy granted legitimate private video websites the right to self-management and self-surveillance, which helped popular foreign TV gain a large following in China. In April 2014, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT) intervened in the operation of video-streaming websites, tightening up their less regulated broadcasts of foreign TV series, particularly those produced in the USA. Subsequently, popular American TV series such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–present) and *The Practice* (1997–2004) were banned for displaying information which is "inappropriate for viewing" in both original and subtitled versions, while series such as *House of Cards* have remained available (Jiang 2014). According to the Regulations on the Importation and Broadcast of Foreign TV Programmes (SAPPRFT 2014), the following topics are prohibited from public exhibition:

- 1) those denying the basic principles determined by the constitution;
- 2) those affecting the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of China;
- 3) those leaking classified information, threatening national security or damaging the credibility and interests of China;



- 4) those encouraging hatred and discrimination among ethnic groups, jeopardising solidarity among ethnic groups, or violating ethnic cultural norms and principles;
- 5) those propagating cults and superstitions;
- 6) those disturbing social order and threatening social stability;
- 7) those depicting pornography, gambling, violence, or abetting people in committing crimes;
- 8) those humiliating or defaming others, or damaging the lawful interests of others;
- 9) those compromising social morality or traditional cultures in China; and those containing information which is prohibited by law, administrative regulations or government policies.

However, the case of *House of Cards* illustrates the nature of censorship as a “contextual, individualized, and continuously negotiable rather than absolute or binding” practice (Calkins 1998: 243), since there are no comprehensive definitions or guidelines specifying the elements targeted by the censors. Thus, the negative comments on communism were deleted in the first season, whereas all the controversial information and dialogue remained intact in the second season. The censors seemingly approve or disapprove of a particular piece of information, as well as its relevant translation, based on their interpretation of the regulations mentioned above. This lack of consistency indicates a certain degree of arbitrariness in censorship which allows the government to maintain its authoritarian censorship regime or to intensify it at any time. Therefore, censorship may be subject only to the ideology of the ruling administration rather than to a set of consistent and transparent standards; as Leonardi (2008: 81) states: “Censorship itself was thus seen as an expression of ideology of those who wish to consolidate their power in order to dominate and exert control over others”. From this perspective, the preservation of controversial information in translation, as illustrated in Section 3.1 above, may still be politically motivated for ideological control.

3. POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE SHOWING OF *HOUSE OF CARDS*

Popular foreign TV has been welcomed by Chinese audiences for several years. Within authorised venues (e.g. television and licensed online broadcasts), translation is often subject to ideological manipulation, which is designed to ensure not only an ideologically acceptable translation, but also—and more importantly—a marketable TL version that conforms to both political and aesthetic imperatives in China and thus ensures audience reception (Li, J. 2012: 91-92). In the case of *House of Cards*, the series stimulated the curiosity of the Chinese audience, presumably because of the show's



fictional representation of the inner circle of the present-day USA government and especially the incisive and brutal schemes of the protagonist, who exhibits the greed and defects of human nature (Qin 2014). While infighting at the top level of national politics has always been the focus of public curiosity, Chinese films and TV programmes have never touched, or never dared to include, such topics by vividly portraying officialdom in the present day, opting instead to “publicize and disseminate political propaganda” (Miao 2010: 91). By importing the series, Sohu may have responded to this desire of the Chinese audience in a timely fashion, while ensuring that the sensitive messages in the show would not be of concern to censorship institutions (Qin and Wang 2014). As mentioned in Section 3.1, the favourable comments made by Qishan Wang on *House of Cards* may have contributed to the non-censorship of the second season (Li, A. 2014; Wang 2014), while the rest of the series, like other foreign cultural imports, was subject to rigid scrutiny (Hsiao 2014). Censors in China, who answer directly to the current administration, may have considered the controversial content to be fictional and may have presumed that the audience would not relate that controversy to real persons or events. It could also be that the censors decided that the original storyline could be used as an efficient tool to expose the dark side of American politics to the Chinese audience, a point highlighted by Jia Xia, a well-known journalist, in an interview with *Deutsche Welle* in 2014 (Wu and Ye 2014). Her opinion corresponds to the statement made by Tiankan Cai (in Blum 2015), China’s ambassador to the USA, who criticised American politics by referring to *House of Cards*:

I have seen both seasons of *House of Cards*, which I think embodies some of the characteristics and corruption that is [sic] present in American politics. [...] Currently, Americans are arguing and debating on how their two political parties have become so extreme. Many things can never be accomplished because the interests of each party are of the greatest importance.

Hence, one of the key factors that motivated the current administration to allow the series to reach the Chinese audience is the depiction of political infighting in the USA government as a contrastive means of reinforcing the sophistication of the Communist political system in China. However, this motivation hardly justifies the preservation of the content involving the Chinese character Xander Feng, who is a typical representation of a corrupted ‘princeling’ (i.e. a descendant of the founders of the People’s Republic of China); the Chinese audience may easily relate Feng and his misconduct to the dark side of the Chinese government. To reveal the reasons behind this move, we need to look to Wang Qishan, who is referred to as China’s ‘anti-corruption tsar’ in many Western media outlets. He answers to the current president of China, Xi Jinping, who considers the fight against corruption as the top priority of his



administration. To the Chinese audience, Feng may represent a fictional reincarnation of disgraced party leader Bo Xilai, whose fall is considered one of the foremost political scandals of the CCP, as well as a convincing example of Xi's resolution to combat corruption, though such measures are customary for China's leadership at the beginning of their reign. Xi was initially motivated by a series of foreign events during the Arab Spring, which, at least in his opinion, warned of how bureaucratic corruption can lead to civil unrest and thereby to the collapse of governments (Broadhurst and Wang 2014). Hence, the depiction of Xander Feng may be used as a counter-example reinforcing the crucial effect of anti-corruption measures on the survival of the Communist regime in China. The Chinese government may also have used the series to show that corruption exists worldwide, even in a country like the USA, which often boasts of its democracy and enforcement of the law. Therefore, the current administration's progress in combating corruption might also portray China as an outstanding example in the international community, as implied by Zhao (2014), a journalist from the CCP's propaganda institution. Regardless of its validity, the anti-corruption campaign may indicate a further political motivation to incorporate *House of Cards* into China's propaganda machine. In addition, part of its storyline may be regarded as a useful device to assist the Chinese government in convincing the Chinese public of its assertive foreign policy and its rising status in the international arena.

Additionally, China has gradually adopted a more self-confident foreign policy in the past few years, particularly in confronting its ocean neighbours in proclaiming its "indisputable sovereignty" at the expense of diplomatic relations with major world powers (Overholt 2012: 129). As shown in Example 1, the official ideology of the Chinese government comes to the fore when the 'Senkaku Islands', the term preferred by other countries to refer to these islands, are subtitled with 钓鱼岛 [Fishing Islands], an expression more akin to official ideology. However, it can be argued that this intervention does not cover the ideology advocated by the original but rather reinforces the scenario in which hostile foreign governments seek to provoke China and interrupt its peaceful rise. In this way, official propagandists demonstrate to the public the government's resolve in defending the integrity of Chinese territory, thereby winning their support and appreciation through fictional diplomatic scenes in a popular foreign political drama. Indeed, the administration is allowing the portrayal of the 'new face' of China (given its progress in economic and domestic reform) to the world, thus seemingly leaving Mao's political system further behind. The authorities are probably reluctant to put this idea into words and, serendipitously, Underwood delivers the message for them, regardless of how controversial—or even unsurprising—it may sound to the audience.



4. CONCLUSIONS

Despite China's stringent censorship regime, the second season of *House of Cards* reached the Chinese audience without much alterations, allowing for controversial information to remain intact. However, this exceptional exposure to a foreign TV series is still subject to ideological manipulation, as the ruling administration seems to be using unpalatable references to corruption in China's Communist regime as counter-examples to reinforce the urgent need to suppress abuses of power in the Chinese government. The unfriendly depiction of China in diplomatic disputes with Japan is also used to propagate the assertive foreign policy adopted by the current leadership team, which seeks to play a more active and direct role in the international arena. Above all, the storyline of *House of Cards* can be used to support the CCP's ideological propaganda criticising Western (and especially USA) politics, despite the fact that the struggle for power can be just as relentless and merciless in China. Hence, the case of the second season of *House of Cards* cannot be read as a sign of a more relaxed censorship system, but rather an alternative strategy adopted by the CCP's propaganda and censorship institutions to strengthen Communist ideology in a new era. Despite deepening reforms, the formal structure of censorship and control has hardly changed (Clark 1987: 57), whilst "much is permanently out of control" (Pickowicz 1995: 218). The translation of audiovisual materials in China is still subject to censorship, be it visible or invisible, and translation is thus mobilised as a vehicle for ideological manipulation.

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